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ABSTRACT

This study examined the nature of adolescents' responses to ads and stories containing different degrees of stereotypical portrayal of females. Subjects were 115 students in grades 8 and 11 enrolled in English classes in two middle-class suburban school districts. The materials used consisted of four ads and two stories portraying females, selected from current issues of the popular teen magazines "Teen Magazine," "Sassy," and "Visions." Students were given the ads and stories and asked to write a response to each. Students were then asked to respond to the question, "Would you like to be one of the persons in this ad/story? Why or why not?" Students also wrote a narrative evoked by the ad or story, followed by an inference about the ad's message. Results indicated that adolescents, particularly eighth graders and males, demonstrated little critical analysis of stereotyped ads. Adolescents were more likely to "like" the ad persons than the story characters and to generate idealistic stories in response to the ads than to the stories. Results indicated a need to teach critical response skills to stories and advertisements. (Four tables of data are included and 14 references are attached.) (MG)

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Developing Critical Literacy in Adolescence: Adolescents' Responses to Sex Role Stereotyping in Ads and Stories

Ads and popular formula fiction for adolescents often portray characters in relatively traditional, stereotyped roles. For example, magazine ads or formula romance fiction may portray women as dependent, immature, subordinate, and child-like (Goffman, 1979). Rather than responding critically to these stereotyped roles, adolescents responded positively to stereotyped portrayals of heroines in romance novels (Willinsky & Hunniford, 1986). Adolescents also do not respond critically to sex-role stereotyping in ads (Leigh, Rethans, Reichenbach, 1987; Leiss, Klino, & Jhally, 1988).

It may be the case that, through repeated exposure to texts that provide images or behaviors associated with peer-group popularity, adolescents are being socialized to adopt a stance that is more accepting than critical. As such, ads function for Scholes (1989) as "cultural reinforcement," serving to "confirm viewers in their ideological positions" (121). In her analysis of adolescents' story writing, Moss (1989) found that adolescent male and females use formula adventure and romance stories to define their own gender roles, acts of "doing gender." In contrast to the "positive/feeling-good" intended message of ads, adolescents may also respond negatively to characters in realistic, complex literary texts.

Adopting a critical stance to sex-role stereotyping entails the ability to distance oneself from a pleasurable engagement with a text in order to objectify and interpret the limitations of that experience (Langer, 1989; Shumway, 1989). Adolescents may distance themselves by perceiving the text in relationship to its cultural or ideological context, a form of rhetorical criticism (Eagleton, 1983).

Adolescents' ability to respond critically to texts may vary according to grade level and gender. 11th graders were more likely to employ interpretative responses than eighth graders (Beach & Wendler, 1987; Purves, 1981). Male adolescents are less critical of stereotyped portrayals in the media than female adolescents (Durkin, 1983; Williams, La Rose, & Frost, 1981).

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature of adolescents' responses to ads and stories containing different degrees of stereotypical portrayal of females. More specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

What types of responses (engaging, describing, interpreting, criticizing) do adolescents employ in responding to magazine ads and stories with stereotyped versus non-stereotyped characters?
What are the differences between adolescents' identification with and semantic-differential ratings of stereotyped and non-stereotyped ed persons and story characters?
What are the differences between adolescents' ability to infer "messages" for the ads versus stories in terms of larger rhetorical or cultural contexts?
What are the differences between the narratives evoked by ads versus

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stories?

Procedures

Subjects. The subjects in this study consisted of 115 eighth and 11th graders with an equivalent number of males and females who were enrolled in English classes in two middle-class suburban school districts located near a large Midwestern city.

Materials. The materials employed in this study consisted of four ads portraying females selected from current issues of popular teenage magazines, Teen Magazine and Sassy. According to ratings of the degree of stereotyping by a group of graduate students, two of the ads (a "Zum Zum" prom gown ad and a "Coty Musk" cologne ad) portrayed females in a more stereotyped manner than did a Speed-stick deoderant ad and a Mopar oil filter ad.

One of the two stories selected for use in the study, "Friends...and Other Creeps" by Darlene Gourlay from Teen Magazine, portrayed adolescent females in what the graduate students perceived to be a more stereotyped role than the other story, "What Happened in the Cemetery" by Norma Fox Mazer from Visions, edited by Don Gallo. In the "Friends" story, two adolescent females are competing for the same male, only to later reconcile their differences at the end of the story. In the other, more "realistic" story, "Cemetery," an adolescent female is coping with family conflicts with her mother and her disabled father, her concerns about emerging sexulity, her peers' insensitivity, and male sexual harrassment.

Methods. Over a period of three days, students were given the ads and stories in random order and asked to write a freewriting response to each ad and story. Students were then asked to respond to the question, "would you like to be one of the persons in this ad/story? Why or why not?" Students then wrote a narrative evoked by the ad or story, followed by an inference about the ad's message.

Analysis. Three judges categorized the initial freewriting responses according to categories representing five different types of responses: "positive reaction," "negative reaction," "description/evaluation," "interpretation," and "critical analysis." The interjudge reliability (Cronbach alpha) was .98. The students' reasons for "liking" or "not liking" the persons/characters were categorized as reasons referring to character traits, the situation, or their own experience, as well as a reasons implying an inability to suspend their disbelief. The interjudge agreement was .96.

The students' thematic inferences regarding the "messages" of the ads and stories were categorized as "message-only" or "contextualized," the latter referring to inferences about the motives or intentions of an advertiser or writer constituting the larger rhetorical context; the interjudge reliability was .97.

The narratives evoked by the ads and stories were rated according to the "degree of elaboration" on a three-point scale, with little or

no elaboration of the events or character descriptions receiving a "1" rating and extensive elaboration receiving a "3" ratings; the interjudge reliabilty was .94. The narratives were also categorized as "idealistic" versus "realistic." Narratives judged as "idealistic" portrayed experiences in a positive, romanticized version, typically with a happy ending. Narratives categorized as "realistic" dealt with more realistic, problematic, complex aspects of experience; the interjudge reliability was .97.

Results and Discussion

Types of responses. The percentages of types of overall freewriting responses to each of the ads and stories are presented in Table 1 (see attached Tables). The students were more likely to cite their positive or negative reactions to the stories than to the ads. A relatively high percentage of students (27%) reacted negatively to the more "realistic" story, "Cemetery." The students were consistently more likely to respond to the ads with "descriptive/evaluative" responses (Zum-Zum: 50%, Coty Musk: 36%, Speed-Stick: 54%, and Mopar: 43%) than to the stories ("Creeps": 6% and "Cemetery": 14%). These responses frequently referred to the ad persons' physical appearance. This concern with physical appearance is consistent with Willinsky and Hunniford's (1986) finding that, in contrast to adult readers' focus on heroines' chararter traits (Radway, 1985), adolescents respond to heroines primarily in terms of their physical appearance.

Students employed consistently low percentages of "critical analysis" responses to all texts, particularly in response to the stereotyped ad and story: only 12% of the students were critical of the the Zum-Zum ad, and only 18% were critical of the more stereotyped "Friends" story.

Grade level differences. The differences in these response types according to grade level (eighth vs. 11th) are reported in Table 2 (see Tables). Chi-square analyses (type by grade level) for each ad and the "Friends" story indicated that response types varied significantly according to grade level (Coty Musk, $\chi^2 = 123.7$, $p < .0001$; Zum-Zum, $\chi^2 = 67.7$, $p < .0001$; Speed Stick, $\chi^2 = 61.7$, $p < .0001$; Mopar, $\chi^2 = 44.9$, $p < .0001$; "Friends," $\chi^2 = 46.4$, $p < .0001$); "Cemetery," $\chi^2 = 22.6$, $p < .05$).

The eighth graders were consistently more likely to employ "descriptive/evaluation" responses than the 11th graders. 60% of the eighth graders' responses to the "Zum-Zum" and to the "Speed Stick" ads, compared to 41% and 49% for the 11th graders respectively, consisted of "descriptive/evaluative" responses. In contrast, only 10% ("Friends") and 22% ("Cemetery") of their responses to the stories were "descriptive/evaluative." The 11th graders were consistently more likely to respond with "critical analysis" responses than the eighth graders. Only 4% of the eighth graders, had a "critical analysis" response to either the most stereotyped "Zum-Zum" ad or to the "Friends" story compared to 20% and 31% of the 11th graders respectively. These eighth graders may have had more difficulty than the eleventh graders in stepping back from or out of the context in order to objectify their experience (Langer, 1989).

Gender differences. Chi-square analyses indicated that gender differences were also significantly related to response types (Coty Musk, $\chi^2 = 120.4$, $p < .0001$; Zum-Zum, $\chi^2 = 66.2$, $p < .0001$; Speed Stick, $\chi^2 = 69.8$, $p < .0001$; Mopar, $\chi^2 = 42.2$, $p < .0001$; "Friends," $\chi^2 = 44.7$, $p < .0001$; "Cemetery," $\chi^2 = 25.3$, $p < .05$).

Females reacted more positively to the more "realistic" "Friends" story (24%) than males (11%), who, in turn responded more negatively to the story (25%) than females (4%). Males responded with more "descriptive/evaluative" response than females to the most stereotyped ads--the Coty Musk (male = 43% vs. female = 27%) and the Zum-Zum (male = 57% vs. female = 43%). Females were consistently more likely to interpret the texts, differing particularly from males in the percentage of interpretative responses to the stories ("Friends," male=33%, female=52%; "Cemetery," male=24%, female=46%). While females (17%) were more likely to respond critically to the Zum-Zum ad than males (7%), there was no pronounced, consistent difference between the males and females' percentages of "critical analysis."

Types of reasons for responses to the ad persons/characters. Table 3 presents the combined percentages of the categorized reasons given for "liking" versus "not liking" the ad persons and story characters. The students' reasons constituted a more positive "liking" of the ad persons than the story characters. The combined percentages for students' reasons for "not liking" the stories were 73% ("Friends") and 69% ("Cemetery"). The students were consistently more likely to fail to suspend their disbelief in responding to the ads than in responding to the stories (Zum Zum: 12%, Coty Musk: 23%, Speed Stick: 20%, Mopar: 24%, "Friends": 5%, "Cemetery: 9%), suggesting a possible difficulty in distinguishing between the ads and the "real world."

Semantic-differential ratings. T-test comparisons ($p < .01$) of the combined semantic differential mean ratings for the four ads and for the two stories indicated that students rated the story characters in significantly more negative terms ("weak," "bad," "soft," "boring," "passive," "negative," "dull," "insecure," "traditional," "dreaming," and "not like me") than ad persons. (The students differed significantly in their between-story ratings of the two stories on only three of the eleven scales).

Thematic inferences. The grade level differences in thematic inferences categorized as "message only" versus "contextualized" are presented in Table 4. Chi-square analyses indicated that grade level was significantly related to the type of thematic inference for three of the ads and for the "Friends" story Zum-Zum, $\chi^2 = 37.3$, $p < .0001$; Speed Stick, $\chi^2 = 85.6$, $p < .0001$; Mopar, $\chi^2 = 27.5$, $p < .001$; "Friends," $\chi^2 = 17.3$, $p < .01$; "Cemetery," $\chi^2 = 40.5$, $p < .05$); the relationship with Coty Musk, $\chi^2 = 8.2$, and with "Cemetery" ($\chi^2 = 13.8$) was not significant. 11th graders inferred a higher percentage of "contextualized" thematic inferences than did eighth graders for the Zum-Zum (77% vs. 42%), Speed Stick (69% vs. 19%), and Mopar (55% vs. 27%) ads and for the "Friends" story (68% vs. 54%). For most of the texts, the older students were therefore more likely to conceive of the message in terms of a larger rhetorical context.

Degree-of-elaboration of the evoked narratives. The narratives evoked by the ads (M = 2.3 (2.3)) were significantly more elaborate than those evoked by the stories (M = 2.1 (1.2), (t = 3.2, p < .01.), differences that may reflect differences in adolescents' prior "intertextual" knowledge related to ads than the stories. 11th graders wrote more elaborate stories than eighth graders for the ads (M, 11th = 2.5; M, 8th = 2.2; F = 4.8, p < .05) and the stories (M, 11th = 2.4; M 8th = 2.0; F = 5.7, p < .01). Females (M = 2.4) wrote more elaborate narratives in response to the stories than did the males (M =1.7) (F = 10.3, p, < .01), possibly due to the fact that main characters in the stories were females.

Type of the narrative. Anaylsis of the evoked narratives as "realistic" versus "idealistic" indicated that the more stereotyped ads tended to evoke the more "idealistic" narratives. 65% of the narratives evoked by the Zum-Zum ad and 58% of the narratives evoked by the Coty Musk ad were categorized as "idealistic" compare with 55% for the Speed-stick and 48% for the Mopar ads. In contrast, the narratives evoked by the two stories were more likely to be categorized as "realistic"--("Friends," 84% and "Cemetery, 76%).

These results indicate that adolescents, particularly eighth graders and males, demonstrated little critical analysis of stereotyped ads. Moreover, adolescents were more likely to "like" the ad persons than the story characters and to generate "idealistic" stories in response to the ads than to the stories. This implies the need to teach critical response skills to not only stories but also to advertisements. Such instruction could focus on distinguishing between an emotional engagement and critical detachment involved in inferring the rhetorical and cultural motives and values constituting a text.

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Table 1
Percentage of Types of Responses to the Ads and Stories

Response types	Zum Zum	Coty Musk	Speed Stick	Mopar	"Friends"	"Cemetery"
Positive reaction	2%	3%	5%	3%	20%	14%
Negative reaction	4%	3%	5%	5%	13%	27%
Description/ evaluation	50%	26%	54%	43%	16%	14%
Interpretation	32%	26%	22%	27%	35%	34%
Critical analysis	12%	32%	14%	22%	18%	14%

Table 2
Percentage of Types of Responses to the Ads and Stories by Grade

Response types	Zum Zum		Coty Musk		Speek Stick		Mopar		"Friends"		"Cemetery"	
	8th	11th	8th	11th	8th	11th	8th	11th	8th	11th	8th	11th
Positive reaction	0	2%	0	6%	2%	5%	3%	2%	20%	19%	16%	15%
Negative reaction	4%	4%	4%	2%	8%	5%	6%	5%	21%	5%	25%	26%
Description/ evaluation	60%	41%	43%	28%	60%	49%	53%	34%	10%	4%	22%	7%
Interpretation	32%	33%	28%	25%	21%	23%	21%	33%	45%	41$	30%	31%
Critical analysis	4%	20%	25%	39%	9%	18%	17%	26%	4%	31%	7%	21%

Table 3
Types of Reasons for Identifying with Persons/Characters in the Ads and Stories

Types of reasons	Zum Zum	Coty Musk	Speek Stick	Mopar	"Friends"	"Cemetery"
Total "liking	53%	54%	53%	37%	22%	22%
Total "dis-liking"	35%	23%	27%	39%	73%	69%
Failure to suspend disbelief	12%	23%	20%	24%	5%	9%

Table 4
Degree of Elaboration and Narrative Type for Narratives Evoked by the Ads and Stories

	Zum Zum	Coty Musk	Speed Stick	Mopar	"Friends"	"Cemetery"
Mean degree of elaboration	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.1	1.8
Type of narrative						
"realistic"	34%	42%	52%	54%	84%	75%
"idealistic"	56%	58%	48%	46%	16%	25%